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ABSTRACT

In this university course for independent study of contemporary American poetry, the following points are brought out: (1) Poetry is essentially formal; (2) Poetry is the product of the conscious mind; (3) Poetry should appeal to the intellect; (4) Poetry is essentially apolitical. In the course of study presented, seven assignments are included: (1) The Traditionalists, (2) The Black Mountain School, (3) The "San Francisco Renaissance," (4) Bly & Wright, (5) The New Surrealists, (6) Other Voices, and (7) The Young Scene. (CK)

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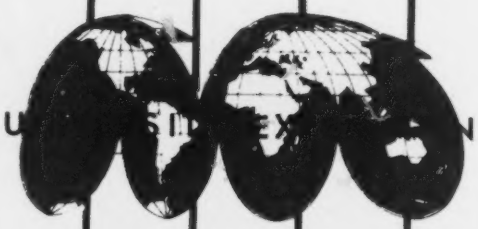

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Extramural Independent Study Center

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS / AT LAWRENCE

ED058198

MODULAR CURRICULUM:
ENGLISH
Contemporary American Poetry:
1946 to the Present
1971

Course Prepared by

Richard Deutch
Assistant Instructor of English
University of Kansas

This module represents approximately eight to ten weeks' work; however, it can be tailored to suit individual needs. Credit is to be determined by the institution recording the work. Students enrolled through E.I.S.C. will receive ¼ unit credit.

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IMPORTANT!

GUIDELINES FOR INDEPENDENT STUDY

In beginning independent study, you must remember there is a greater personal responsibility for achievement than in a course taken in residence. Much that ordinarily is recited in the classroom must be written out in independent study. Therefore, as you prepare each assignment, you must exercise your best judgment.

The normal time allowed for the completion of the course is twelve months from the date of enrollment. If you are unable to complete the course within the twelve-month period, a six months' extension will be granted upon payment of a $5 fee prior to the normal expiration date. All extensions are effective on the expiration date.

To help you successfully complete this course, the Extramural Independent Study Center suggests the following:

1. *Work with regularity.* You are urged to accomplish a regular amount of work each week. However, you are requested to send in your second lesson after the first one has been returned. If you wait too long between assignments, you may lose the continuity of your work. You MAY NOT, however, send in more than five assignments in a seven-day period unless you have special permission from your instructor.

During vacation periods many instructors are away from the campus and your assignments may have to be forwarded. If you need to complete this course by a certain time, you should start work early enough that a slight delay during vacations will not adversely affect your schedule.

2. *Observe proper manuscript form.* All assignments must be submitted on the special paper designed for independent study. (See the Sample Lesson at the back of this syllabus.) A pad is included with your syllabus, and you may order additional pads from the Center for $1.25 each.

(a) Always write your name, address, the course name and number, the number of the assignment and the page number at the top of each page. Either type your answers double-spaced or write them neatly in black or blue-black ink, using only one side of the paper. In submitting an assignment, fold all the pages of the assignment together with the heading on the outside. (For illustration see the Sample Lesson.) (b) Mail each completed assignment separately to the Center, making sure that you mail the assignments in numerical order and that the envelope bears the correct postage. (It is a good idea to keep a copy of your work.) Be sure to notify the Center of any change of name or address. Following the suggested format will speed the return of your lessons.

3. *Use these study suggestions.* (a) Study the entire reading assignment before working with the questions. (b) Answer mentally as many of the assigned questions as you can. Consult your texts and other media for additional information. Make notes. (c) Study all of your notes, organize them, and begin to write. (d) Although you are free to use your texts, you should avoid parroting the writer's words, and when a direct quotation is necessary, identify the author, title, and appropriate page numbers. Plagiarism will result in your being dropped from the course. (e) To help in review, some students find it best to write down questions before answering them. (f) Review frequently. Exams and formal papers are required periodically unless your instructor exempts you from such progress checks. (g) If you need information about any assignment, write to your instructor on a separate sheet of paper and enclose it in an assignment. Your instructor is always willing to help you explore ideas initiated by the course and to carry on a dialogue with you.

4. *Note the rules governing examination accreditation.* Your final examination is very important. The application should be mailed in at least a week before the examination date.

College level examinations, when taken in Kansas, must be given by the Extramural Independent Study Center at the University of Kansas, by officials of one of the other state colleges, or by supervisors at one of the Correspondence Examination Centers in the state. (For a list of Examination Centers see the Schedule of Examinations sent with your course material.)

If you wish your credits to apply toward a degree at an accredited Kansas college or university, other than a state institution, you may

make arrangements with the dean of that college to have your examination supervised there. Out-of-state enrollees must arrange with officials of an accredited college to have their examinations proctored.

If there is no accredited college in your vicinity, you may arrange for supervision with the local superintendent of schools or a secondary school principal.

High School course examinations, given in any state, should be administered by your principal or superintendent of schools. You must make your own arrangements for supervision.

5. *Give us your ideas and opinions.* It is our wish that you derive as much benefit as possible from this course, and we want to know to what extent it has met your needs. Because all courses are in a continuous state of revision, you will assist us greatly by filling out the evaluation form which will be sent with your grade. There is room for special comments or suggestions, and all of the information will be considered in revising or adapting the syllabus material. If during the course of instruction you wish to make comments or inquiries that you feel will not benefit your instructor, you may send them to the Extramural Independent Study Center. Regardless of prior comments, PLEASE FILL OUT AND RETURN the form sent with your grade.

The Student Services staff is available to help with any problems of an administrative or instructional nature requiring special attention.

6. *Note the refunds and extra charges.* You may obtain a partial refund of fees only if you apply for it within three months of the date of your registration. If no more than five assignments have been completed, the course fee minus $5 for registration and $2 for each corrected lesson will be returned to you. Course material fees or postage may not be refunded.

7. *Within a six-weeks' free drop period, full refund will be made for textbooks returned to the Kansas Union Book Store or to the University Book Store in Manhattan.* The texts must be new, unmarked, and have the price stickers on the books. Damaged books, including mail damage, must be sold as used books. Shipping charges are never refundable.

8. *Remember textbook resale.* Upon completion of a course, the K.U. and Manhattan bookstores will buy back books if they are currently used for independent study. The price is one-half the current new price.

Contemporary American Poetry

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PREFACE: LISTEN TO THE POETRY

Wordsworth described the poet as a man speaking to men. By this he meant two things. First of all, despite what LIFE magazine may say about Allen Ginsberg, the poet is not of a race apart; he is not a Martian, he is a man, and his experiences are roughly comparable to those of every other man. Otherwise, what he has to say would be of no conceivable use to us.

Second, he is a man speaking; to get his message, we have to listen to him. It is only quite recently that poetry became a written art; before the invention of the printing press, before the invention of writing, poetry existed. Homer, we are told, recited his verses from memory; THE ILIAD and THE ODYSSEY are among the first poems ever written down, but the degree of their artistry makes it highly unlikely that they were the first poems. In fact, there is every reason to believe that they are the culmination of a very long tradition of what must have been oral poetry.

If we take all this literally, we are forced to conclude that poetry doesn't even exist until it is read aloud. The poem is not what is on the page; it is the experience of <u>saying</u> and <u>hearing</u> the words that are on the page, just as music is sound, not notations.

During the next few weeks, you will be introduced to quite a few poems. They are, regrettably, written down, not recorded. (Consequently, they are rather like a musical score; only a highly-accomplished musician can derive much pleasure from simply reading a score.) Read as many of them as you can aloud, in your own voice and without exaggerating what they seem to you to be saying. Quite possibly a phrase, a line or a whole stanza will stick in your mind; you may not even realize you have memorized it, but something about it will haunt you because another man, who happens to be a poet, will have spoken to you.

It will be poetry. And it will be yours.

Read these poems as you would enter a new big-as-life experience: with your eyes and mind open, trying not to force your old ken on the poems but allowing the poems to reveal new worlds, in images, to you.

The questions at the end of each lesson are to be answered in essay form. You will be able to convey your ideas best if you are careful in the organization and construction of your replies. In addition to the assigned questions, for <u>at least</u> two lessons you are required to write a paragraph about a poem or

group of poems that has for some reason touched you. Explain why you are touched, and use quotations effectively. The final exam will consist of questions similar to those at the end of the assignments; it will count one-third of your grade.

The textbooks for this course are:

Robert Bly. SILENCE IN THE SNOWY FIELDS. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962.

Allen Ginsberg. HOWL. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956.

Allen Ginsberg. KADDISH. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1961.

Donald Hall, ed. CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962.

James Wright. THE BRANCH WILL NOT BREAK. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963.

Books may be ordered C.O.D. from either of the sources below:

The Kansas Union Book Store
Lawrence, Kansas 66044

The University Book Store
623 N. Manhattan Ave.
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

Because reprint permissions were not granted for Theodore Roethke's poems and you must send them back to the center, you are encouraged to buy his excellent book:

Theodore Roethke. WORDS FOR THE WIND. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1961.

INTRODUCTION

By the end of the Second World War, American poetry had begun at long last to emerge from the dominance of T.S. Eliot. Eliot, whose voluminous criticism was perhaps more influential than his poetry, had been the leading figure in English and American letters for longer than any single person before him. The appearance, in 1922, of THE WASTELAND had established him as the leading poet of the post-World War I generation; his criticism, first collected in 1932 with some of it pre-dating even THE WASTELAND in publication, set the standards of taste in poetry which were to prevail for the next thirty years. Before we undertake a discussion of the paths our poetry has since taken--the work of men who were born around or since the date of publication of THE WASTELAND and are, most of them, still alive and writing today--let us take a look at a few of the characteristics of the "typical Eliot poem." Perhaps the best way to do this is to review some of the ideas about poetry which Eliot and his followers set forth. The ideas one has about what poetry should be will obviously affect the sort of poetry he will write--or read.

1. *Poetry is essentially formal.* The most influential group of poets and critics in this country to follow Eliot's theories--the "New Critics"--held to the old theory that poetry is composed of two distinct elements: *form* and *content*. Rather than get into an endless discussion of what these terms mean, let us define *content* loosely as what the poem is about--love, death, futility, or a baseball game--*form* as the manner in which it is treated. (In contrast, Robert Creeley holds that form is never more than an extension of content.) To Eliot and the New Critics, the manner in which the poet treated his subject--is it a sonnet? a sestina? do the lines scan?--was of equal importance and sometimes of even greater importance than either the subject of the poem or the poet's attitude toward it. One could tell a "good" poem from a "bad" poem simply by determining whether the form was appropriate to the content; and discussions of "what the poem is saying" were considered completely irrelevant unless somehow related to the way in which it was said. In UNDERSTANDING POETRY Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (two New Critics) attempted to explain in prose the meaning of a poem by Yeats; they then asked, "What is the difference between the prose paraphrase and the poem itself?" The answer: "the meter is largely responsible for the richness and concreteness the poem has."

2. *Poetry is essentially the product of the conscious mind; the poet is a technician, not a seer.* Although he did not deny the importance of the influence of the unconscious on the conscious mind, Eliot believed that the unconscious (or that part of it which Freud called the *id*, wherein our instincts are caged) was to be suppressed. Poetry, though it comes from the unconscious, was to be shaped, immediately upon arrival so to speak, into a formal whole by the conscious mind of the poet. (In contrast, here is a statement by Allen Ginsberg

on how he came to write HOWL: "I thought I wouldn't write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind. . . ."[1] By "real mind," Ginsberg means his *unconscious*; notice too, that he claims to have forgotten all about *form* in writing HOWL.) Eliot feared the unconscious as a possible source of anarchy. His image of the poet was less one of the bearded prophet, like the prophets and oracles of antiquity (or of the modern equivalent, a sort of inspired lunatic who never bathes and smokes pot incessantly) than of a research chemist in his laboratory. Carefully, and with all his wits about him, the poet handles his words and themes like the elements and compounds in test tubes.

3. *Poetry should appeal to the intellect.* "To Donne," Eliot said of one of the poets he admired most, "a thought was an experience." In Donne's poetry, and the poetry of other Elizabethans, he found other qualities which appealed to him: symmetry, formal excellence, irony, and wit. Especially in his second volume (POEMS, 1919), he sought to incorporate these qualities in his own work. In the hands of his followers (and sometimes in his own hands) these essentially intellectual elements tended to produce the poetry which was as emotionally barren as it was technically correct. Sometimes the irony, the air of detached sophistication, and the deliberately round-about way of saying things resulted in mere riddling:

> Till broken in the shift of quieter
> Dense altitudes tangential of your steel,
> I am become geometries, and glut
> Expansions like a blind astronomer
> Dazed, while the wordless heavens bulge and reel
> In the cold revery of an idiot. [2]

This is a pretty typical example of bad post-Eliot verse. Could you have guessed, by the way, that it is about a rider on a subway?

4. *Poetry is essentially apolitical.* This idea is a holdover from the old Romantic theory of *ars gratiae artis* (art for art's sake), which states that poetry exists--along with painting, music, and sculpture--in a realm of its own, and that the artist, insofar as he is functioning as an artist, is above such petty considerations as politics or religious dogma. He must not lower his art by writing a poem, say, against the Vietnam war; if he does, he will be sacrificing his artistic integrity and the result will be propaganda, not poetry. For poetry makes nothing happen, according to W. H. Auden, a poet of the 30's and 40's who was influenced by Eliot.

We could list several more characteristics of poetry in the age of Eliot; poems in this period tended, for example, to include at least one reference to classical mythology, whether the subject seemed to call for it or not. We do not mean to imply that all of the poetry was bad, however--some of it was excellent. Nor can we blame Eliot entirely for the mistakes of his imitators. We must also

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[1]Donald M. Allen, ed., THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY (New York, 1960), p. 415.

[2]Allen Tate, "The Subway," COLLECTED POEMS (New York, 1937), p. 59. Reprinted by permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

bear in mind that there are some fine poets, such as the ones we will read in Assignment I, still writing formal poetry of great wit and technical excellence, in which Jupiter and Minerva tend to make regular guest appearances. Art, like nature, abhors straight lines, and no single period is without both its radicals and conservatives.

For the most part, however, we will be reading poets whose ideas about poetry are profoundly different from Eliot's. We have already seen how Allen Ginsberg threw all considerations of form out the window when he sat down that day in San Francisco to hammer out HOWL. Robert Bly, who won the National Book Award in 1968, has very different ideas from Eliot about the role of the unconscious in poetry and the book for which he received the Award is comprised mostly of poems protesting U.S. policy in Vietnam. Many poets today are writing political poems and they are writing them mostly in *free* verse (which Eliot claimed did not exist), leaving the critics little to talk about in the way of form and forcing the reader to consider what the poem is saying. The work of the younger poets, those who have not yet seen their thirty-fifth birthday, is moving overwhelmingly in the direction of *free* verse passionately concerned with social issues.

One other problem must be discussed before we can begin (at last) reading some poems; it is the question of what sort of language the poets should use. It is commonplace that the English and the Americans have difficulty understanding one another. If you have visited England and attempted to accomplish something so ordinary as ordering a meal, you will recognize the truth of this statement. A similar sort of difference exists between the language of the traditional poets--those who draw their inspiration from Eliot who was very much in the English tradition--and those poets, by far the majority today, who prefer to imitate the common speech they hear around them. If Robert Lowell, whom we shall be reading in Assignment I, can write lines which sound like this:

> All you recovered from Poseidon died
> With you, my cousin, and the harrowed brine
> Is fruitless on the blue beard of the god . . .[3]

(which is hardly the way you or I would be likely to talk about a relative of ours who drowned at sea), then Robert Creeley, a man who breathes the same air as Lowell and, indeed, attended the same university, can talk about a man he knows in lines that sound like this:

> As I sd to my
> friend, because I am
> always talking,--John, I

---

[3]Robert Lowell, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," LORD WEARY'S CASTLE (New York, 1946), p. 14. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

sd, which was not his
name, the darkness sur-
rounds us, what . . .

. . . . .

drive, he sd, for
christ's sake, look
out where yr going.[4]

Of course, in all fairness, Lowell has been moving steadily in his recent work towards an idiom much closer to common speech.

The difference between the two kinds of writing, moreover, is not that one employs rhetoric and the other does not: "The darkness sur-rounds us" is somewhat rhetorical and Allen Ginsberg, whom no one would dream of calling a traditionalist, is one of the more rhetorical poets. But if you can hear the difference between Lowell's lines and those of Creeley, you will have no difficulty in recognizing it when it occurs in other poets.

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Those who wish to learn about the authors of a given period are better advised to begin by reading as much as they can of the period's authors than to start out by reading criticism. If one begins by reading a single author, then one of his contemporaries, then another, and so on, little by little he will begin to be able to piece together for himself what they have in common, as well as where they differ. If, on the other hand, he is handed a ready-made blue-print, flawed, as any human work must be, by inaccuracies and distortions, he may find himself trying to fit the individual authors into a pattern to which they do not belong. That is why the reading list of this course is so long, and the commentary (though you may not believe it at this point) minimal. The issues we have just been discussing are relevant and important, as a backdrop is important to a play; the poems are the play, and the play is the thing. A student should no more concentrate on introductory materials than he should spend an evening at the theater gazing at the scenery. On the other hand, a glance at the scenery might inform him whether the play is set in the sixteenth or the twentieth century.

Again, it is the author's hope that the student will above all else read the poems aloud as often and enjoyably as he can.

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[4]Robert Creeley, "I Know a Man," FOR LOVE (New York, 1962), p. 38. Reprinted by permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

THE
TRADITIONALISTS

ASSIGNMENT I

THE TRADITIONALISTS

As we saw in the Introduction, contemporary poetry is not all written in *free verse*, nor are contemporary poets all as flamboyant as Allen Ginsberg. There are a fair number of poets who still write in the manner of Eliot, or more precisely, in the manner of Robert Lowell. Lowell was born in 1917 of a family which boasted a Harvard president and two famous poets, James Russell Lowell and the then-notorious Amy.[5] His first book, LAND OF UNLIKENESS, appeared in a small edition in 1944 (he had begun writing poetry at Harvard in order to pass the time when he failed to make the football team). He incorporated much of the material from this book into LORD WEARY'S CASTLE (1946), and immediately established himself as an important young poet; the book won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1947. Readers were impressed with Lowell's technical excellence, his irony, and his ability to compress words and feelings into tight, spring-like sentences full of double meaning and beneath-the-surface associations. One of his more recent books, LIFE STUDIES (1959), is a brilliant collection of poems which are mostly about his family, and which includes a long prose interlude which is one of the funniest autobiographical pieces in our literature. LIFE STUDIES won the National Book Award in 1959.

In his more recent work, Lowell has been moving away from the sort of poetry with which he has always been associated. "For Sale" and "Skunk Hour" in CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY, for example, are written in *free verse* and both end with a precise visual image, the one of a woman's face in a window, and the other of the skunk who

> . . . jabs her wedge-head in a cup
> of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
> and will not scare. (Robert Lowell, "Skunk Hour")

This technique strongly resembles some of the more "radical" poets we shall encounter in the next lesson. Lowell's publications continue to be met with enthusiasm and lavish praise from the critics, and he is a pretty good bet to be the first American poet to win the Nobel Prize (unless we count Eliot, who by then was a British citizen).

Theodore Roethke (1908-1963), though a friend of Lowell's and a friendly rival, wrote a very different kind of poetry. Though elegant and formal, he seems more at ease in presence of his readers; in poems like "I Knew A Woman" he is downright playful, and his verses for children are tremendously

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[5]Amy Lowell, a stout, cigar-smoking outspoken woman, led a group of poets in England known as the Imagists, or, as their cynical critics labeled them, the "Amygists."

popular--especially with adults. But beneath this playfulness is the darker Roethke, the lost son. Born and raised, as "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" may suggest to you, "around a beautiful greenhouse owned by [his] father and uncle," he was dealt a severe blow by the death of his father. He adored his father (c.f. "My Papa's Waltz") and regarded him as the ordering principle in his universe; when his father died, the whole world he had known seemed to collapse. The magnificent elegy entitled "The Lost Son" is about this new void; by all means read it over several times aloud, or have someone read it to you. It is superb.

Richard Wilbur, who is perhaps the most elegant of the poets in this lesson, was hatched with a uranium spoon in his mouth. Born in New York City in 1921, he attended pastoral Amherst College, and after a brief stint in the war took a teaching position at Harvard, and later at Wellesley. At the moment he is a professor of English at Wesleyan (Connecticut). This sheltered life, along with the fact that he is independently wealthy and extremely handsome, seems to have left Wilbur with very little to talk about; his poems are mainly exercises in technical feats--rhyming and scanning with amazing dexterity--and having virtually nothing to say except, "Look at me." Oddly enough, one does look, simply because it is nice to look at beautiful things. He is included in this lesson for that very reason.

Anthony Hecht (b. 1922) is more like Lowell than any other poet in this lesson, both in his preference for working with different forms ("The Vow," for instance, is very tightly constructed) and in his insistence on the more horrible aspects of existence. His ideas about the role of the unconscious in poetry are pretty grim and reminiscent of Eliot and Lowell ("The fantastic and hideous images of the unconscious," as he calls them, "certainly have their place in poetry"). His most recent book, THE HARD HOURS (1967), contains many poems which remind the reader of poems such as "After the Surprising Conversions" in CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY. While introducing Hecht to an audience in New York several years ago, Lowell confessed that certain of Hecht's poems "gave him the shivers." Hecht, in turn, has often said that he regards Lowell as the greatest of living American poets.

Lest anyone think that the poetry of formalism is dying, THE HARD HOURS won a National Book Award nomination and walked off with the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1968, almost a quarter of a century after the appearance of Lowell's first book.

Reading Assignment:

THE TRADITIONALISTS in the Contemporary American Poetry Readings book.

Donald Hall: pp. 17-26, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY (ed. Donald Hall Baltimore, 1962).

Robert Lowell: pp. 31-40, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Richard Wilbur: pp. 62-70, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Anthony Hecht: pp. 71-76, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Writing Assignment:

Write two essays of three hundred words or so on any two of the following questions, provided only that they are not both about the same poet. Keep in mind that there is no right answer, and avoid using technical terms such as *internal rhyme* or *enjambment* unless absolutely necessary. (Do not suppose, for example, that when you have observed that a poem such as "After the Surprising Conversions" is written in heroic couplets you have said anything really essential as to what the poem is about.) Do not be overly concerned about the three hundred word limit; explore the question in your own mind and when you feel you have answered it, stop writing. Be sure to make your essays cohesive, even as you answer each section of the question.

1. Look up *Jonathan Edwards*, *puritanism* and *predestination* in the encyclopedia. Assume that it is Edwards speaking in "After the Surprising Conversions" (he is), and that the sermon which he says he preached "on a text from Kings" contained elements of the doctrine of predestination. Why is the man concerned for his salvation after hearing it? What hints does the poem give about the man's character? Do the last two images in the poem contrast in any way with the rest of the poem? How?

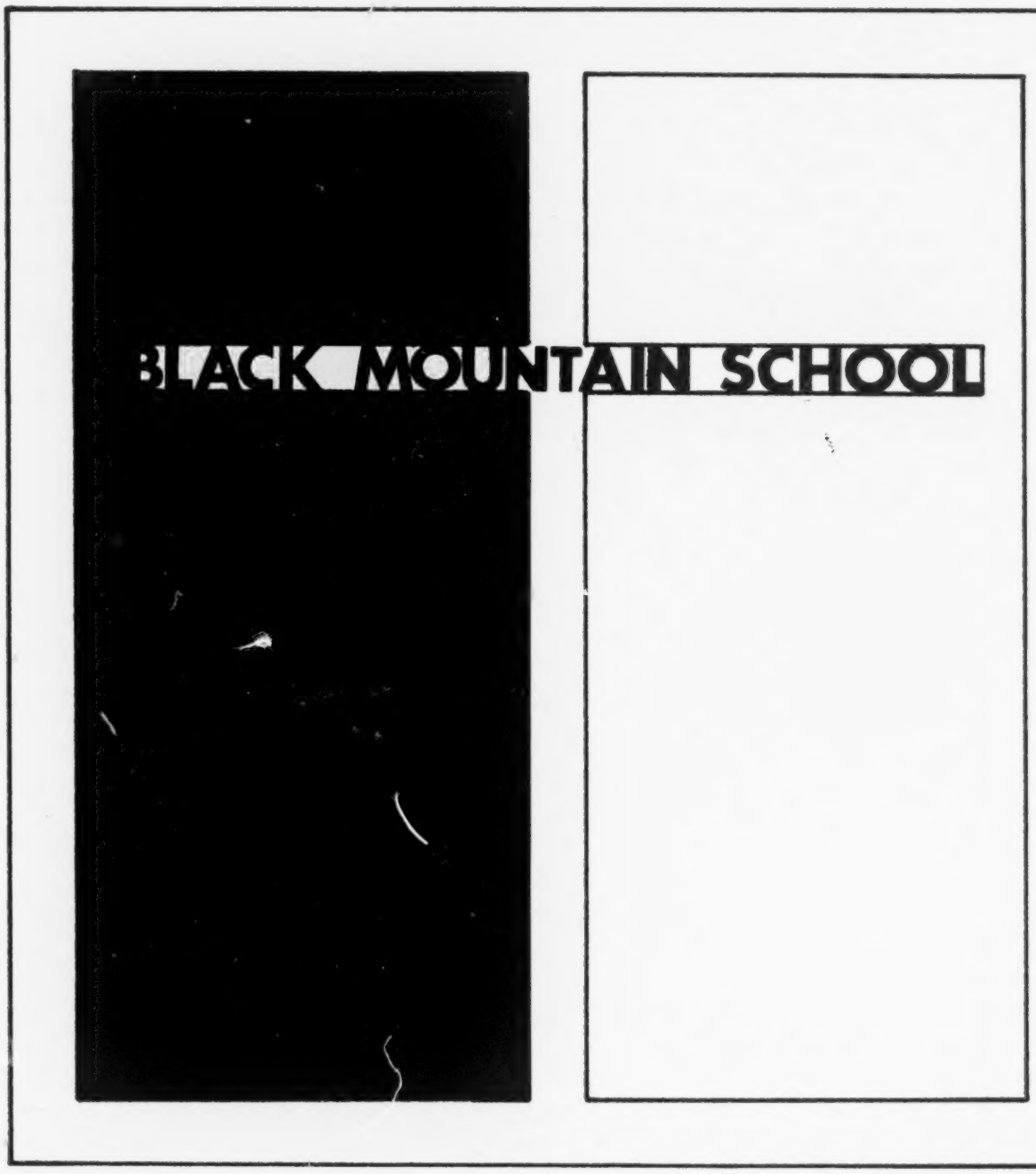
2. Do the details of the descriptions in "Skunk Hour" suggest a similar kind of sickness in the poet himself? How? In answering the question, discuss both nature imagery and the people whom the poet describes.

3. What is the poet's attitude toward Samuel Sewall? Is he annoyed with him, amused by him, or both? Find out who Samuel Sewall is.

4. Discuss the contrasts in "More Light! More Light!" You will find that there are two of them: the obvious contrast between the two deaths, and the more subtle contrast between "light" and "darkness." How do these two contrasts relate to one another?

5. For once, let's lapse into a discussion of how the poet uses language and rhythm to get his message across in "Dolor." This poem is about sadness, isn't it? How do the details in the poem communicate this feeling? Does the use of long droning rhythms within the lines suggest this feeling also?

Don't forget to choose two poems which touch you among all the poems in this course. Write a well-integrated paragraph about the effects of each poem and include it with the lesson in which the poem appears.


BLACK MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

ASSIGNMENT II

THE BLACK MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

While the traditionalists continued to write highly articulate verse under the influence of Eliot and Lowell, a new sort of poetry was developing in America during the fifties. Springing up simultaneously around the short-lived Black Mountain College in North Carolina (the Black Mountain School) and on the West Coast (the "San Francisco Renaissance"), the group abandoned Eliot's theories for those of his contemporary, William Carlos Williams. Williams believed that: 1) poetry should imitate natural patterns of speech and abandon all extrinsic notions of form; and 2) poetry should derive its subjects from what the poet finds around him, rather than from some antique mythology. For a while Williams was associated with the Imagists, a group of English and American poets who attempted to eliminate excessive rhetoric from their poems by writing only in terms of objects; Williams described it as "no ideas but in things." His most famous Imagist poem is "The Red Wheelbarrow":

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens. [6]

Obviously this technique has its limitations, and the Imagists neither survived long as a group nor did they, strictly speaking, always practice what they preached. But their influence on Williams and his followers is very strong and it is clearly perceivable in such poems as Denise Levertov's "Merritt Parkway."

Williams spoke of the *variable foot* as the proper measure for American poetry. By this term he meant that, in seeking a system of prosody to reproduce the American idiom ("The American idiom," he wrote, "is the language we use in the United States"), the poet must abandon the old method of counting syllables and accents; he must imitate the common speech of those around him,

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[6] William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow," THE COLLECTED EARLIER POEMS OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (New York, 1938), p. 277. Copyright (c) 1938 by William Carlos Williams. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

speech which is accentual but not divided into a set number of syllables. In other words, it is not natural, he argued, to speak like this:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips red.

More likely, one would say simply, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; coral is far more red than her lips red." In the first example, the lines are divided into units of ten syllables each with accents falling alternately on each second syllable; it is the *iambic pentameter*, the standard "traditional" meter of English poetry. In the second example, the placing of the accents is dependent on neither the number of syllables nor on where they fall in the line; inevitably some of the accents remain, but the only order they follow is the simple logic of what is being said. Moreover, Williams denied what everyone had accepted without question since the fourteenth century: that the *iambic* (short-long, short-long) meter is the natural one in which to speak English. The more natural measure (measure in verse is inescapable) is the *dactyl* (long-short-short; long-short-short), but the placing of the accents will vary according to the logic of what is being said; hence we have the *variable foot*.

Is this sufficiently obscure?

Don't be alarmed. The criticism which Williams himself wrote on the subject of the *variable foot* is every bit as hazy as the paragraph which just passed your blinking eyes, perhaps even more so. He never solved or even approached the obvious problem; now that we are free of traditional English metrical patterns, how do we order the new one? How do I know a *variable foot* when I've read one, or written one? Although various poets in this lesson have attempted to answer this question (your teacher may assign you some of their prose on the subject), the only real answer is that if we all speak the same language our ears will tell us what does and what does not sound like actual speech in a poem. As Louis Armstrong said when asked what "jazz" is, "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know."

A more significant aspect of Williams' critical theories is his "clinical realism" in his choice of subject: "Dr. Williams writes of 'the plums that were in the icebox'; of 'a red wheelbarrow***beside the white chickens'; of weeds on the sour land 'by the contagious hospital.'"[7] Abandoning the traditional subjects of pastoral English poetry (such as white sheep grazing on an impossibly green hillside, a shepherd named Croydon and a shepherdess named Amaryllis with a ribbon on her crook) and the traditional figures of mythology, Williams attempted to capture the harsh New Jersey landscape in his poems. He sought to "get the gasworks into the poem." Both the Black Mountain poets and the San Francisco group ("beatniks," a LIFE magazine reporter dubbed them) follow Williams closely in this pre-occupation. Donald Hall calls it the "colloquial" direction in American poetry. They are basically *realists* ("There are no miracles but facts,"

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[7]Scully Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long, eds., THE AMERICAN TRADITION IN LITERATURE (New York, 1967), p. 1541.

wrote Levertov), trying to get the toilet seat and the broken hairbrush and the smog over Newark to transmute into poetry, trying to translate the ugly as well as the beautiful aspects of their everyday lives into something meaningful and nourishing to the spirit.

Reading Assignment:

THE BLACK MOUNTAIN SCHOOL in the Readings book.

Denise Levertov: pp. 81-88, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Robert Creely: pp. 124-131, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Gary Snyder: pp. 183-187, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Writing Assignment:

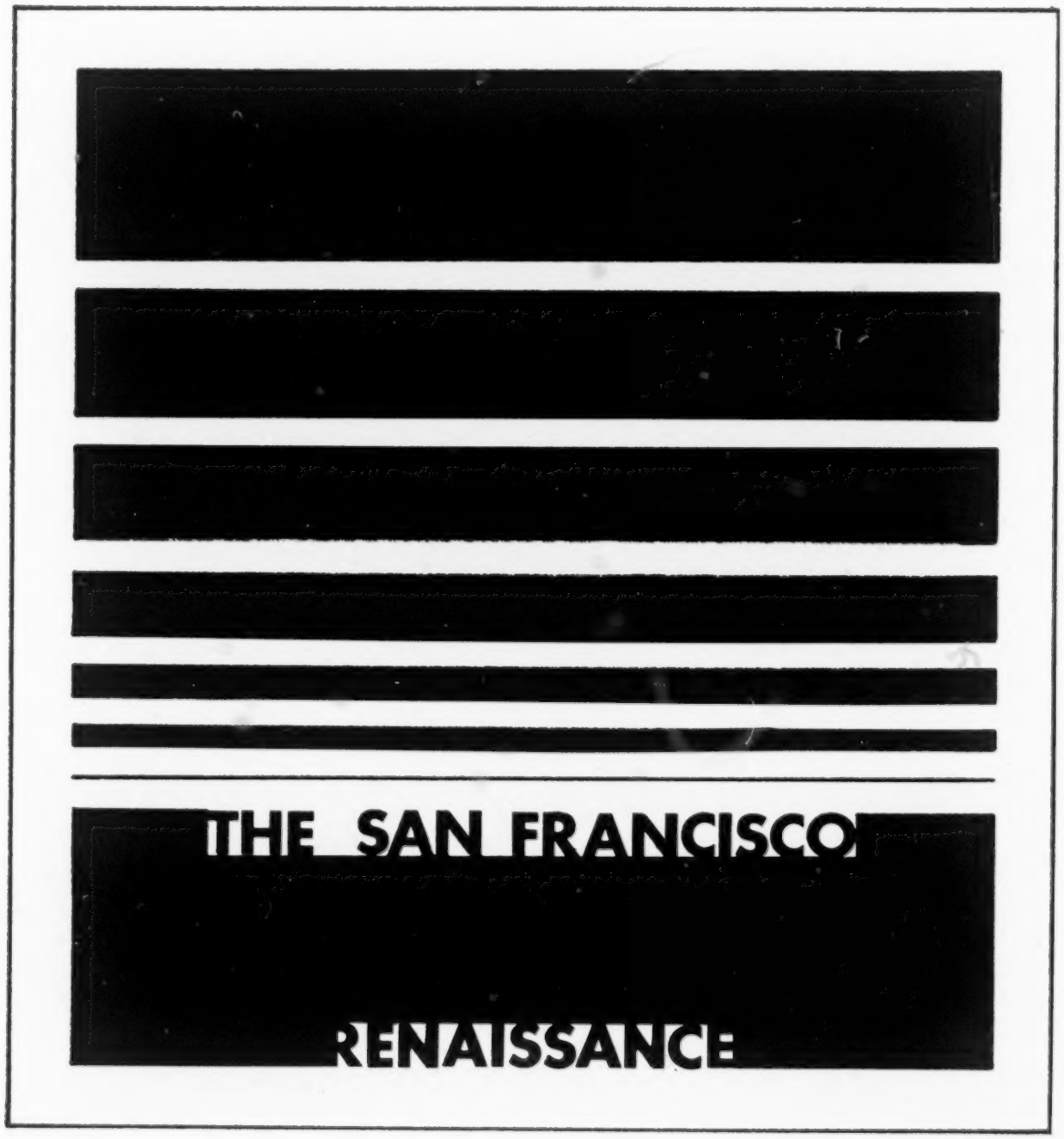
Write a polished essay of about four hundred words discussing one of the following questions. Explore the *ideas* in the poems.

1. Denise Levertov has remarked that "no ideas but in things does not mean no ideas." In several of the poems you have read for this assignment, there seem to be social comments implicit in the poems, even though the poems themselves seem to end abruptly and without comment. "Merritt Parkway," for example, which consists essentially of images and imitations of the sound of passing cars, contains an *idea* about life in America: it is often impersonal and goes by at a tremendous rate of speed. Choose one of the poems you have read--Creeley's "I Know a Man" or Snyder's "Hay for the Horses" would be excellent choices--and explain how the images and sounds suggest a deeper meaning than appears at first sight. Before you attempt this, be sure to READ THE POEM ALOUD several times and DECIDE WHAT THE MEANING IS BEFORE YOU START WRITING ABOUT IT.

2. Milton's PARADISE LOST attempts, by the use of Christian myths, "to justify the ways of God to man." "Milton by Firelight" seems to be composed on a different premise. Comment on the relationship between these two poems.

3. "Above Pate Valley" ends with a non-sentence as if a thought had occurred to the poet suddenly as a consequence of what he has just seen and done. How does the last line relate to the details in the rest of the poem?

4. Creeley remarked that "form is nothing but an extension of content." Refer to the Introduction to this course for definitions of *form* and *content*, and decide, using examples from his poetry, what he means. Be sure to look up the word *extension*, even if you think you know what it means.


THE SAN FRANCISCO
RENAISSANCE

ASSIGNMENT III

THE "SAN FRANCISCO RENAISSANCE"

Here are the "Beatniks," those talented young poets who began publishing about the same time the Black Mountain College was scrounging for its existence in the hills of North Carolina. They are actually in the same tradition as the Black Mountain group, with Williams as their spiritual father (Williams wrote the introduction for HOWL). Unlike their peers on the East Coast, however, they were unfortunate enough or flamboyant enough to attract the eye of a LIFE reporter, and as you may remember, LIFE proceeded to ridicule them in the cheapest and most devastating fashion imaginable. Only one of them, Allen Ginsberg, managed to survive all that vitriol and continue to grow as a poet; his popularity has grown with him, and he is today possibly the most photographed poet in the world. (Robert Duncan, whom Levertov and Creeley regard as the greatest poet of their generation, managed to avoid the LIFE-TIME scandal and belongs, in every way except geographically, with the Black Mountain School.) You will find that you have a good deal of reading to do this week, so the assignment will be light.

But let us, for once at least, allow the poet to speak for himself: here is Allen Ginsberg's own account of how he came to write HOWL.

ALLEN GINSBERG: Notes for *Howl* and Other Poems[8]

By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from W. C. Williams' imagist preoccupations. I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco, unemployment compensation leisure, to follow my romantic inspiration--Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath. I thought I wouldn't write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind--sum up my life--something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, write for my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears. So the first line of *Howl*, "I saw the best minds," etc. the whole first section typed out madly in one afternoon, a huge sad comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin's walk, long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac would hear *sound*

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[8]Donald M. Allen, ed., THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY (New York, 1960), pp. 414-418. Copyright (c) 1960 by Donald M. Allen. Reprinted by permission of Grove Press, Inc.

of--taking off from his own inspired prose line really a new poetry.

I depended on the word "who" to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off from again onto another streak of invention: "who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars," continuing to prophesy what I really knew despite the drear consciousness of the world: "who were visionary indian angels." Have I really been attacked for this sort of joy? So the poem got serious, I went on to what my imagination believed true to Eternity (for I'd had a beatific illumination years before during which I'd heard Blake's ancient voice & saw the universe unfold in my brain), & what my memory could reconstitute of the data of celestial experience.

But how sustain a long line in poetry (lest it lapse into prosaic)? It's natural inspiration of the moment that keeps it moving, disparate thinks put down together, shorthand notations of visual imagery, juxtapositions of hydrogen juke-box--abstract haikus sustain the mystery & put iron poetry back into the line: the last line of *Sunflower Sutra* is the extreme, one stream of single word associations, summing up. Mind is shapely, Art is shapely. Meaning Mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image & gets to Last Thoughts. Loose ghosts wailing for body try to invade the bodies of living men. I hear ghostly Academics into Limbo screeching about form.

Ideally each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit. Tho in this recording it's not pronounced so, I was exhausted at climax of 3 hour Chicago reading with Corso & Orlovsky. My breath is long--that's the Measure, one physical--mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath. It probably bugs Williams now, but it's a natural consequence, my own heightened conversation, not cooler average-dailytalk short breath. I got to mouth more madly this way.

So these poems are a series of experiments with the formal organization of the long line. Explanations follow. I realized at the time that Whitman's form had rarely been further explored (improved on even) in the U.S. Whitman always a mountain too vast to be seen. Everybody assumes (with Pound?) (except Jeffers) that his line is a big freakish uncontrollable necessary prosaic goof. No attempt's been made to use it in the light of early XX Century organization of new speech-rhythm prosody to *build up* large organic structures.

I had an apt on Nob Hill, got high on Peyote, & saw an image of the robot skullface of Moloch in the upper stories of a big hotel glaring into my window; got high weeks later again, the Visage was still there in red smokey downtown Metropolis, I wandered down Powell Street muttering, "Moloch Moloch" all night & wrote *Howl* II nearly intact in cafeteria at foot of Drake Hotel, deep in the hellish vale. Here the long line is used as a stanza form broken within into exclamatory units punctuated by a base repetition, Moloch.

The rhythmic paradigm for Part III was conceived & half-written same day as the beginning of *Howl*, I went back later & filled it out. Part I, a lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamblike youths; Part II names the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb; Part III a

litany of affirmation of the Lamb in its glory: "O starry spangled shock of Mercy." The structure of Part III, pyramidal, with a graduated longer response to the fixed base. . . .

A lot of these forms developed out of an extreme rhapsodic wail I once heard in a madhouse. Later I wondered if short quiet lyrical poems could be written using the long line. *Cottage in Berkeley & Supermarket in California* (written same day) fell in place later that year. Not purposely, I simply followed my Angel in the course of compositions.

What if I just simply wrote, in long units & broken short lines, spontaneously noting prosaic realities mixed with emotional upsurges, solitaries? *Transcription of Organ Music* (sensual data), strange writing which passes from prose to poetry & back, like the mind.

What about poem with rhythmic buildup power equal to *Howl* without use of repeated base to sustain it? The *Sunflower Sutra* (composition time 20 minutes, me at desk scribbling, Kerouac at cottage door waiting for me to finish so we could go off somewhere party) did that, it surprised me, one long Who . . .

Last, the Proem to *Kaddish* (NY 1959 work)--finally, completely free composition, the long line breaking up within itself into short staccato breath units--notations of one spontaneous phrase after another linked within the line by dashes mostly: the long line now perhaps a variable stanzaic unit, measuring groups of related ideas, marking them--a method of notation. Ending with a hymn in rhythm similar to the synagogue death lament. Passing into dactyllic? says Williams? Perhaps not: at least the ears hears itself in Promethian natural measure, not in mechanical count of accent. . . .

A word on Academies; poetry has been attacked by an ignorant & frightened bunch of bores who don't understand how it's made, & the trouble with these creeps is they wouldn't know Poetry if it came up and buggered them in broad daylight.

A word on the Politicians: my poetry is Angelical Ravings, & has nothing to do with dull materialistic vagaries about who should shoot who. The secrets of individual imagination--which are transconceptual & non-verbal--I mean unconditioned Spirit--are not for sale to this consciousness, are of no use to this world, except perhaps to make it shut its trap & listen to the music of the Spheres. Who denies the music of the spheres denies poetry, denies man & spits on Blake, Shelley, Christ & Buddha. Meanwhile have a ball. The universe is a new flower. America will be discovered. Who wants a war against roses will have it. Fate tells big lies, & the gay Creator dances on his own body in Eternity. (Fantasy 7006, 1959)

* * *

The satirical and overtly political nature of contemporary poetry is nowhere better illustrated than in this lesson. Ginsberg's "Wichita Vortex Sutra" is a well-written assault on and expose of the "credibility gap" existing between government promises and performance, and the poem strategically attacks the traditional American system of values where it is strongest--Kansas and the Midwest. Ginsberg had a tremendous influence upon the development of Gregory Corso, whom he met in a Greenwich Village coffeehouse shortly after Corso was released from prison in 1950. Corso followed Ginsberg to San Francisco, where he was encouraged by both Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti to continue his work. He has published five books of poetry to date.

Ferlinghetti was born in New York in 1919. During World War II he was involved in the French and Norwegian resistance. After the war, he travelled for a time and finally arrived in San Francisco in 1951, where he began to publish the Pocket Poet Series with City Lights Books. His earlier books of poetry include PICTURES OF THE GONE WORLD (1955) and A CONEY ISLAND OF THE MIND (1958). His latest book, TYRANNUS NIX, is a pungent comment on the "Nixon Age."

Reading Assignment:

THE "SAN FRANCISCO RENAISSANCE" in the Readings book.

Allen Ginsberg: HOWL (San Francisco, 1956).

Allen Ginsberg: KADDISH (San Francisco, 1961).

Robert Duncan: pp. 41-49, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

Writing Assignment:

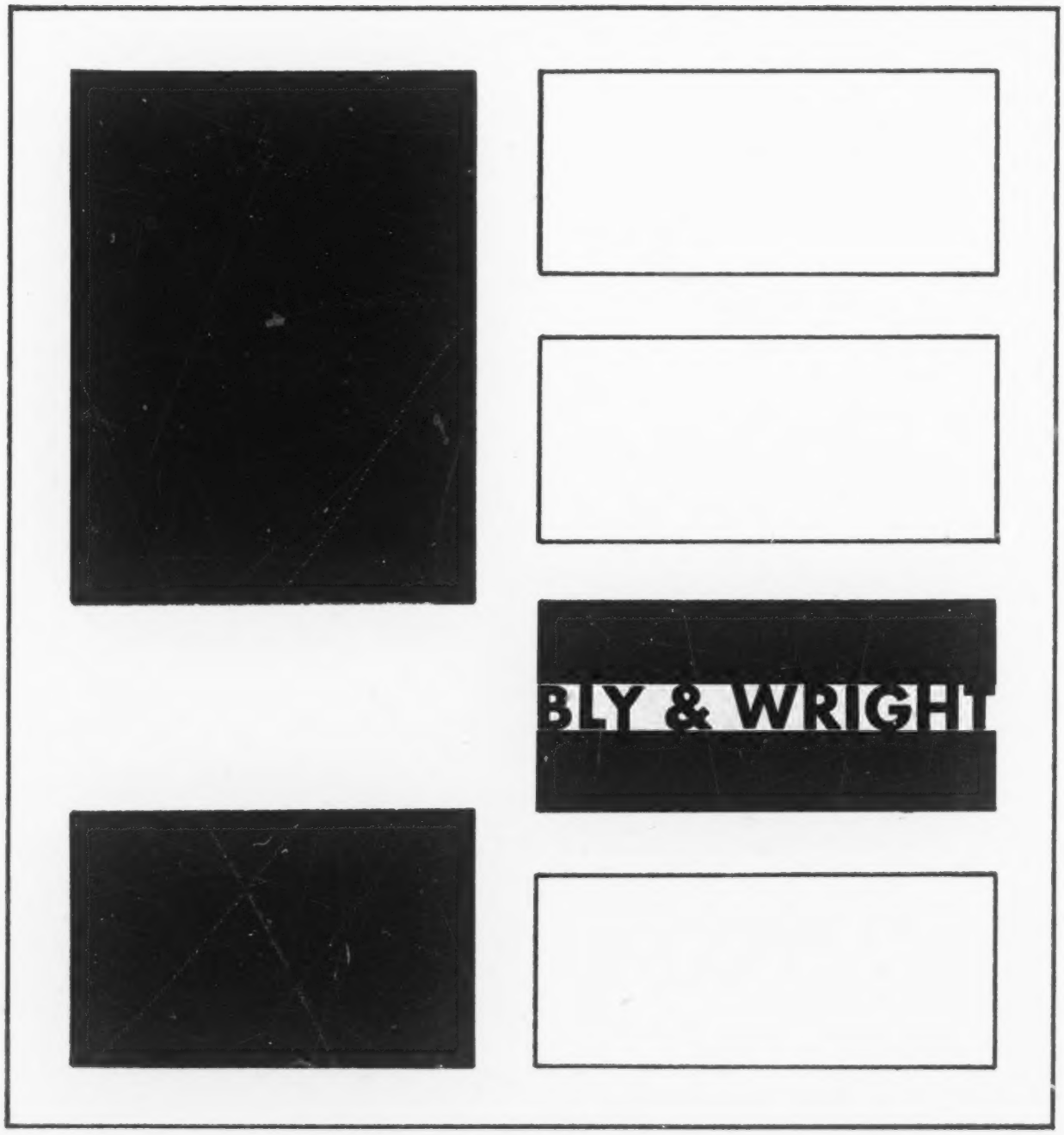
Write a one-page essay of about two hundred to two hundred and fifty words on any one of the following questions:

1. Definition of satire:
   a. the use of ridicule in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice, folly, etc.
   b. a literary composition, in verse or prose, in which human folly, vice, etc., are held up to scorn, derision, or ridicule.

   Is "America" a satire? Is "Marriage?" How effective are they as satires? What is the effect of the mock Indian language in the last lines of "America?"

2. Anthony Hecht has remarked that "Howl" fails as a poem because the speaker professes to be suffering intense agony, whereas the details of the poem suggest that he is having "the time of his life." Discuss.

3. Both satire and critical comment are present in "Underwear," "Marriage," and "Wichita Vortex Sutra." Do you think that the poets are in agreement in their condemnation of middle-class values? Do the poets offer an alternative? Discuss.


BLY & WRIGHT

ASSIGNMENT IV

BLY & WRIGHT

In the poetry of Robert Bly, James Wright, and their followers, we find a significant departure from both the traditionalists and the Black Mountain School. These poets seem to have abandoned questions of form altogether in order to concentrate on subject matter; their only formal concern is that the poem be in the poet's own voice. Their poetry is usually calm, quiet and reflective; often it presents us with a dramatic situation in which the poet is seen observing the natural world. (Read Bly's "A Late Spring Day in My Life" now for a perfect example.) Yet this is not simple *nature* poetry. In observing the external world of nature the poet attempts to relate it to the inner world of his subconscious. Even when we are given only a series of images with no interpretation attached to them, we have the eerie feeling that a lot more is going on in the poem than is apparent on the surface (read "Arriving in the Country Again" by Wright).

What the poet sees determines the whole shape of the poem; we are left to determine for ourselves what the significance of the experience is. Although this technique is new to poetry in English, it has existed in Oriental poetry for thousands of years. Here is an anonymous Japanese poem, translated by Kenneth Rexroth:

> Did a cuckoo cry?
> I open the door
> And look about.
> There is only the moon
> Alone in the night. [9]

What is the meaning of the experience? A Japanese reading the poem even for the first time would know immediately, since he has a frame of reference--(a series of dramatic situations into which the poem fits) dating back hundreds of centuries. But even without this frame of reference, we know that the writer of the poem is lonely, perhaps deserted by his (or her) lover, awake when he ought to be asleep. Similarly, in Wright's poem, we sense this loneliness; the poet pauses before entering his friends' house; his face is turned from the sun; as he hesitates, he notices his shadow cast on a horse grazing in the field. He does not undertake to explain his feelings to us; he allows us to use our own imagination in re-creating the situation for ourselves. One might say the images themselves are lonely.

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[9] Kenneth Rexroth, Haiku from "45 More Japanese Poems," THE COLLECTED SHORTER POEMS OF KENNETH REXROTH (New York, 1966), p. 299. Copyright (c) 1956 by New Directions Publishing Corporation.

Perhaps another example of this technique might be illuminating. Consider Bly's poem "Watering the Horse." On the surface, the dramatic situation is quite simple. A man is on a farm. He is watering a horse, which is a job he has done no doubt hundreds of times, and the horse is the one he has seen hundreds of times. But suddenly a new thought comes to him, a thought which seems to have arisen out of the simple fact that he has seen a snowflake fall on the horse's mane. Suddenly he thinks of "giving up all ambition." This seems to him to be a significant, at the very least strange, experience. So he decides to record it in a poem. How does he go about it?

The hard-core traditionalist in the English line would tend immediately to approach the problem from the standpoint of form. He may speak of his experience in a sonnet, or a sestina; if in a sonnet, it may be either a Shakespearian sonnet or a Spenserian sonnet or a number of other kinds of sonnets. My guess is that he would write an ode, several hundred lines in length, in which the horse (perhaps a "noble steed" or a "goodly mount," in any case certainly not a nag) is being led by the poet to the water ("crystal stream"), and on the way the poet begins to muse on the vanity of ambition, the folly of pursuing worldly vices. This will go on for a page or so, and finally he will arrive at the Moral: Ambition, like Vanity, is Folly. By this time the horse will have died of thirst. Many good poems have been written using this approach--Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," one of the greatest poems in English, is an example--but it just may possibly be the wrong one to take in this instance. For one thing, the experience which the poet is writing about is brief; the poem, if it is to capture the experience alive, should be brief also. The experience, too, is strange; but the traditionalist, by casting it in a mold similar to readers of English poetry for hundreds of years and providing us with stock imagery and a little tacked-on moral, has reduced it to the utterly familiar.

Bly's approach differs from that of the traditionalist (and, incidentally, from that of the Black Mountain poet who would insist on proper breath lines and variable feet) in that he is content to present the experience as it happened, without cluttering it up with diction, imagery, and meter. The experience is in fact quite familiar to Zen Buddhism, and is known as *wabi*, a state in which the sight of simple objects reminds the viewer of the "faithful suchness" of everything around him, and inspires him with a desire to give up all worldly ambition. It is a brief, fleeting glimpse of reality, impossible to pin down; and the approach which Bly has taken in trying to capture it is a perfect wedding of subject matter and manner of expression. Anything longer, rhymed-and-metered, poetic-dictioned or otherwise inflated, might have failed entirely.

One other unique aspect of Bly's and Wright's poetry needs to be discussed; it is "surrealism," or, as Donald Hall labels it, "expressionism."

We spoke earlier of the way in which Bly and Wright attempt to relate the world of nature--of cities, buildings, trees, and rocks--to the *inner* world, the *subconscious*, the world of images which appear to us all in dreams. In a

poem such as "Arriving in the Country Again," the images remain on the surface, depicting only the outer world of nature, though they suggest the inner feelings of the poet. But quite often, the world of nature and the world of images inside the poet merge--again, just as they do for us in our dreams--and when this happens, strange creatures begin to appear in Wright's and Bly's poetry:

> On a Saturday afternoon in the football season,
> I lie in a bed near the lake,
> And dream of moles with golden wings. (Bly, "Laziness and Silence")
>
> . . . a pirate ship ploughing through dark flowers . . . . (Bly, "Night")
>
> The moon is out hunting, everywhere,
> Delivering fire,
> And walking down hallways
> Of a diamond. (Wright)

This technique--in which reality is distorted in the subconscious and is set down by the artist exactly as he "sees" it in his mind--is known as *surrealism*, a term derived from the French *sur*, above or beyond reality. Originally a movement in painting, it soon became popular with writers in Spain and France; it has not, until now, had its full impact on poets in the United States. At its very best, it is expressive of the *emotion* with which we regard a scene, rather than of the scene itself. Federico García Lorca, the great Spanish poet, merges the physical sense of the guitar with the emotion it arouses in the listeners in his poem "The Six Strings":

> The Six Strings
>
> The guitar
> causes dreams to weep.
> The sob of lost
> souls
> escapes through her round
> mouth.
> And like a tarantula
> she weaves a giant star
> for catching sighs
> that float in her black
> tank of wood. [10]

Lorca was a teacher, for a time, at Columbia University in New York. One day a couple of his students brought him a snail as a gift. He wrote:

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[10]This translation by Sally J. Bruce from Federico García Lorca, "Las seis cuerdas," OBRAS COMPLETAS, 2nd ed. aum. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1955).

They've brought me a snail.
inside it,

a green map of oceans
singing.

My heart
filling slowly with sea water,
little fish
silver and brown . . .

They've brought me a snail! [11]

The surrealist poet, or painter, seeks to re-arrange the details of the natural landscape in order to increase our awareness of things that are happening around us; he wants to shake us up, to re-awaken our perceptions. He reminds us that what we call "reality" is also mysterious, colorful and as unlikely as the leaves in autumn. Lorca wishes to paint neither a slavish reproduction of the landscape nor a complete forgery, but something in between.

Wright, adopting this technique, has written a very unusual description of "Rain." If Wright had wished to write a conventional poem about rain, he could very easily have done so. The setting could be a small cabin on the side of a mountain, surrounded by pines; the poet is sitting alone by the burning embers remembering his lost love, probably named Lenore. Or he could be roaming the streets of Paris; or walking alone in a deserted churchyard. In any event, the details of the poem would be completely predictable, and consequently something we could have written for ourselves. But in Wright's poem our whole area of vision is altered; we see things that had never occurred to us before. The feeling of sadness and uneasiness which we have all experienced on long rainy days has been made into something entirely new, because the poet has forced us to look at it in an entirely new way.

And you thought the variable foot was confusing!

Actually, the poetry of Wright and Bly is so new that it is very difficult to talk about, for the simple reason that poetry in English has nothing with which to compare it. It has certainly made its mark, at least for the present; as I write this, SILENCE IN THE SNOWY FIELDS has gone into its eighteenth edition. Some find it very exciting; some deny that it is poetry at all. Certainly, it requires patience, attentiveness, and silence on the part of the reader. "A poem," says Bly, "grows out of a man like a hand, or an ear."

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[11] Trans., Richard Deutsch from Federico García Lorca, "Caracola," CANCIONES (New York).

Reading Assignment:

Robert Bly: SILENCE IN THE SNOWY FIELDS (Middletown, Connecticut; 1962).

James Wright: THE BRANCH WILL NOT BREAK (Middletown, Connecticut; 1963).

Writing Assignment:

Answer in a single paragraph each, three of the following questions about the poems of Robert Bly and three of the questions about the poems of James Wright.

ROBERT BLY

1. Bly has himself remarked on the prevalence of the theme of death in SILENCE IN THE SNOWY FIELDS. Choosing one or two poems as illustrations, explain the author's feelings about death. Is he afraid of death? Resigned to it? Intrigued by it?

2. In the light of the previous question, what is the meaning of the last line of the poem entitled "Awakening": "Cries, half-muffled, from beneath the earth, the living awakened at last like the dead"?

3. What is the significance of the quotation from the German mystic, Jacob Boehme, at the beginning of the book? Is the central theme of the book *awakening?* Use at least two poems as examples in your discussion.

4. Analyze the progression of thought in Parts I, II, and III of the poem entitled "Poem in Three Parts." What is the effect of abruptly dividing the thoughts in this way? Would the poem be more effective if the poet had provided transitional passages between the stanzas? Discuss.

5. Zen Buddhists speak of a state of mind called *wabi*, in which the "faithful suchness" of everyday objects suddenly overwhelms one with the desire to give up all ambition. Have you ever had the experience of suddenly being mesmerized by a familiar object--a fingernail, a glass of water--when you were completely unaware for a space of time that you were staring? Discuss this phenomenon in relation to the poem "Watering the Horse."

JAMES WRIGHT

1. Probably no single line of recent American poetry has provoked such violent reactions, pro and con, as the last line of "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota." Some have found the line offensive and have contended that nothing in the first twelve lines of the poem prepares the reader for it; others feel that in some non-rational way the images contained in

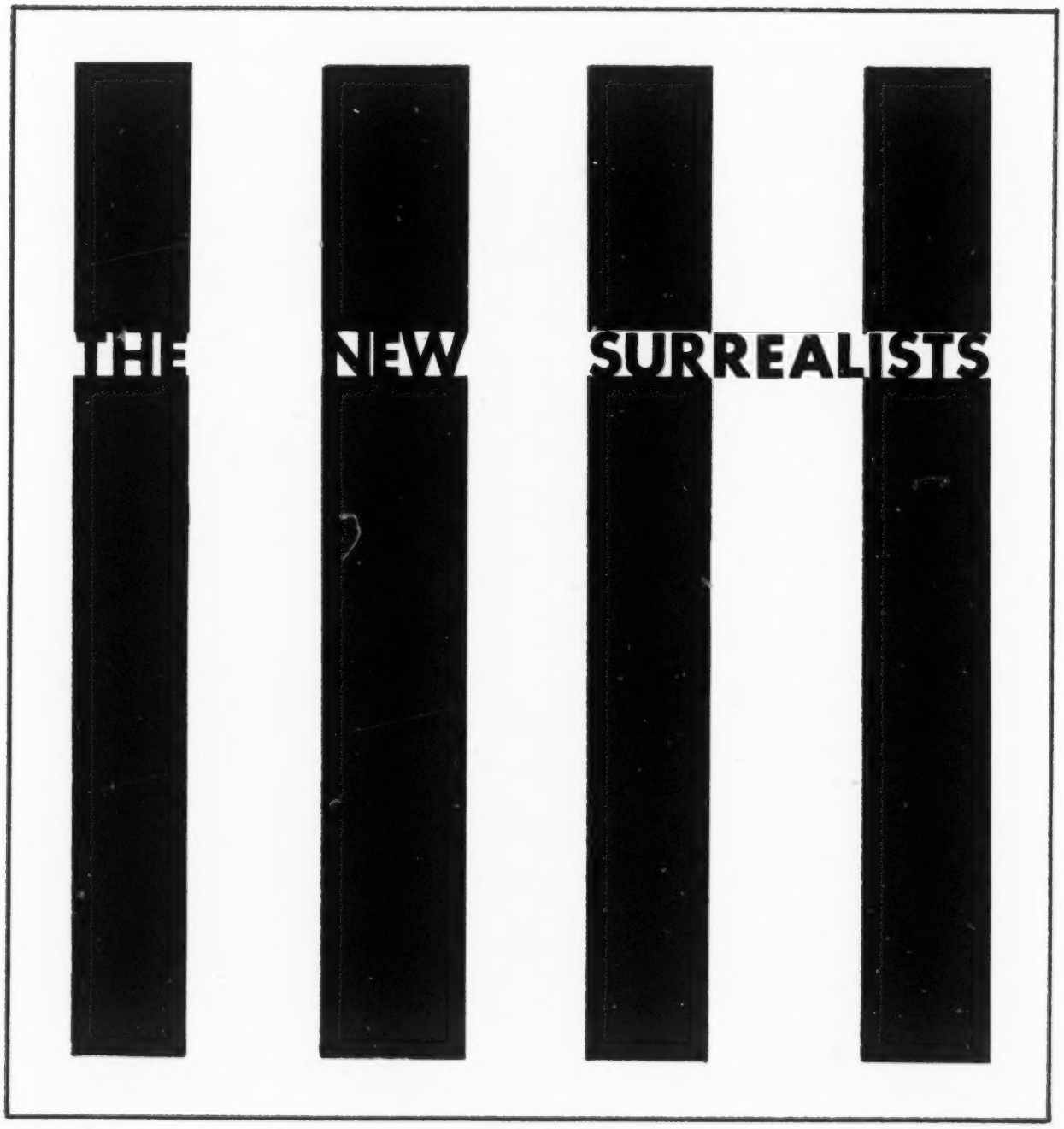
the rest of the poem build with a kind of inevitability to the revelation that the speaker has wasted his life. You're the critic: what do you think and why?

2. Analyze the light and dark imagery of "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959." Is there any irony in the fact that Eisenhower and Franco appear in the light, "in a glare of photographers," and the persecuted peasants of Spain are always in darkness? Of what significance is the quote from Unamuno? With whom are the poet's sympathies?

3. In "Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferry, Ohio," the very striking last stanza begins with the word "Therefore." What is there in the preceding stanzas to suggest this relation of causality? In other words, why, in terms of what we are told earlier in the poem, do the football players "gallop terribly against each other's bodies"?

4. Compare "In the Cold House" to the Japanese poem quoted in this lesson. In what ways are the techniques similar? Why?

5. What is the significance of the "Girls the color of butterflies/That can't be sold" in "The Undermining of the Defense Economy"? What is the poet saying about the defense economy? What is the meaning of the last two lines of the poem?


THE NEW SURREALISTS

ASSIGNMENT V

THE NEW SURREALISTS

Two other poets who have been deeply affected by European surrealism are W. S. Merwin and Louis Simpson. Like James Wright, they began their careers by writing highly formal verse; Merwin, like Wright, won the Yale Younger Poets Award with his first book, A MASK FOR JANUS (1952). But, several volumes of his own poetry and numerous books of translations later, he discovered that formalism no longer sufficed as a vehicle for what he wanted to say. One by one, his new poems began to appear in magazines; the appearance of "Lemuel's Blessing" in the NEW YORKER created a sensation among his many followers. When THE MOVING TARGET finally appeared in 1963, it was obvious to everyone that Merwin had changed his style completely. Influenced largely by the French surrealists, he abandoned every link with the poetry of Eliot and Auden; the elaborate formalism was gone, as well as the mannered ironies and the indirect way of saying things. The book was only a partial success artistically because, as a transitional work, it is a bit uneven. His latest volume, THE LICE (1967), is certainly his finest book to date.

Louis Simpson, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his remarkable book AT THE END OF THE OPEN ROAD (1963), was born in Jamaica in 1923. After he came to the United States in 1940 to attend Columbia University, he spent three years in the United States Army and attained U. S. citizenship. Many of the poems in his first four books are concerned with his war experiences. They are mostly failures as poems, largely due to Simpson's insistence on pouring new wine into old skins; for example, "The Runner," a very long poem about an infantryman, is written in iambic pentameter, a meter which simply cannot contain the noises of airplanes and howitzers and wounded men screaming and the curses of army cooks. AT THE END OF THE OPEN ROAD marks Simpson's coming of age as a poet. Such poems as "The Inner Part" and "In the Suburbs" are, in contrast to his earlier work, as caustic and piercing as rifle bullets.

Both Merwin and Simpson, though they have obviously come under the influence of surrealist Bly, are their own men. Their voices are unmistakably their own and their poems are as distinct from one another's as they are from Bly's. They are still growing as artists, and the end is nowhere in sight. It remains to be seen, of course, whether the New Surrealists will continue to grow as a movement or whether even their founders will press on to something new. Already the publication of Bly's second book, THE LIGHT AROUND THE BODY (1967), which many felt to be inferior to SILENCE IN THE SNOWY FIELDS, has precipitated what might be called a "Bly back-lash." Many young poets who have sent their poems to THE SIXTIES (the publication which Bly edits) only to have them returned heavily marked with green, red, or blue ink, have made dreadful puns about their poems

being "blighted." And as is sometimes the case with poets, Bly seems to need most desperately to be saved from his admirers: his followers are legion, and Missoula, Montana (see "In a Train") has become almost a national shrine of poetic clichés. The magazine most responsible for printing these imitators, KAYAK, was repudiated by Bly himself in an article which appeared in that very magazine; the result was a kind of general chaos, one KAYAK poet attacking another in confusion and truly comical mayhem. Only Bly, Wright, Merwin, and Simpson are sure to survive this "movement"; they have seen it come--have largely brought it about--and they may yet see it go. Bly himself remains assuredly a gigantic figure in the history of American poetry--"one of the few poets," as Simpson has said of him, "from whom greatness can be expected."

Reading Assignment:

W. S. Merwin: pp. 156-163, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Lewis Simpson; pp. 96-104, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Writing Assignment:

Write a two hundred word essay answering one question for each of the poets.

W. S. MERWIN

1. Who is the speaker in "Departure's Girl-friend"? Is the speaker insane? If so, how do the details in the poem, as related to us by the speaker, reflect insanity? For instance, what is the state of mind of a person who sees loneliness leap in the mirrors?

2. Occasionally a discussion of form can be of use in understanding poetry. "Leviathan" is very different from "The Bones." How do these poems differ? Why did Merwin write each poem as he did? What is *similar* about the themes?

3. Does it help your understanding of "Views from the High Camp" to know that Merwin is a "Surrealist"? Or is that information self-evident once you have read the poem? Discuss. What is Merwin saying in this poem?

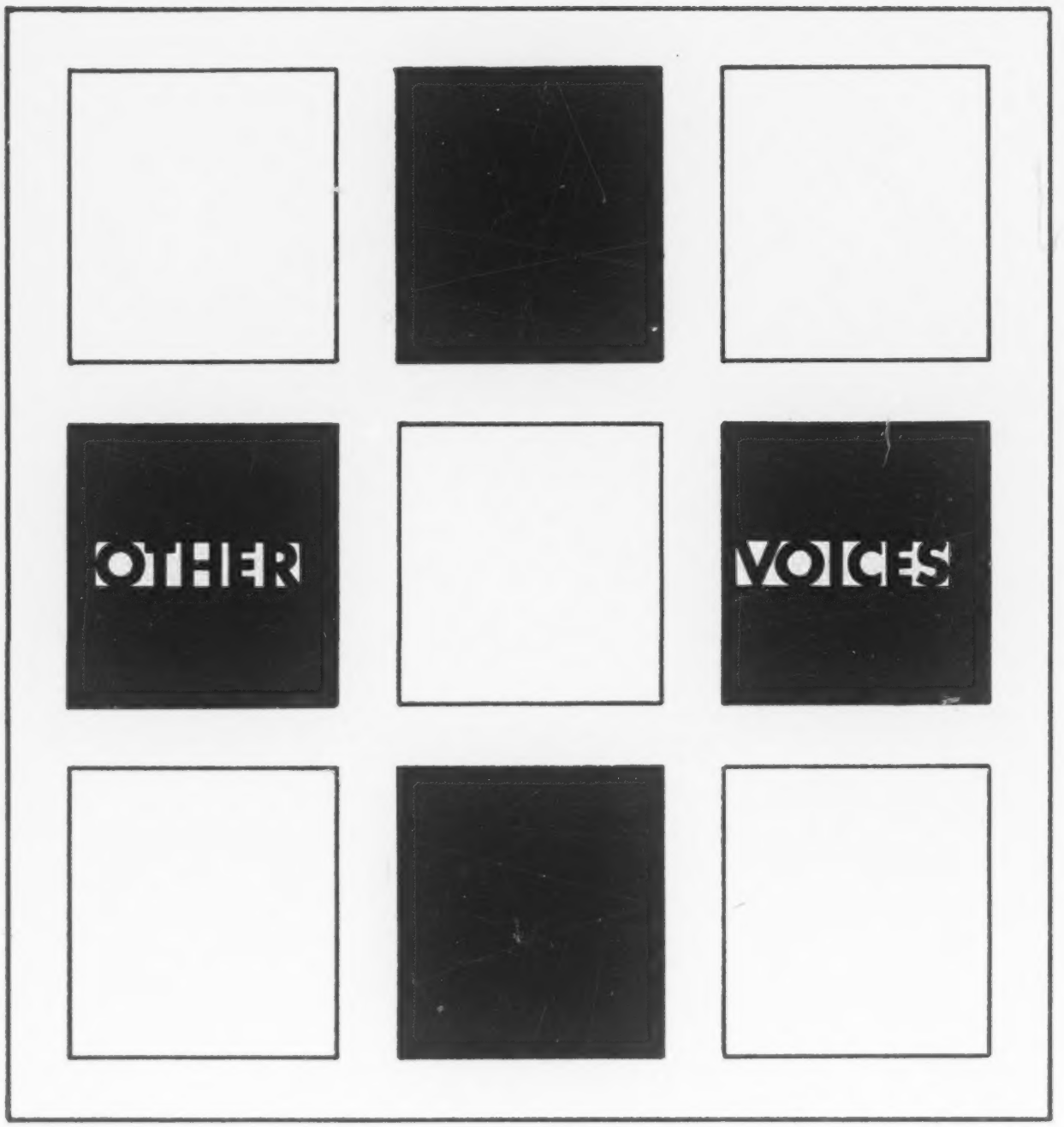
LOUIS SIMPSON

1. "Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain" is a poem about the collapse of America, the death of the American Dream, the closing of the frontiers. Yet it is not a "tragic" poem; indeed, the description of Whitman's statue as "A crocodile in wrinkled metal loafing" is decidedly comic. What is the poet

saying about the death of America? That it is lamentable? Funny? Inevitable? Or all three?

2. In the same poem, the last line is extremely puzzling. What is there about the collapse of America to remind the poet of Italy? Why is red and appropriate color for "the angel in the gate" (the angel at the gate of the Garden of Eden) to imagine? What mental associations does the color red evoke for you?

3. What is the point of "There is"? Why is the word not forthcoming? See if the grouping of images gives you any clues.


OTHER
VOICES

ASSIGNMENT VI

OTHER VOICES

The poets included in the readings for this lesson seem to fit nowhere among the three main movements of American poetry at this moment. They are certainly not traditionalists, nor are they in any way connected with the Beats or the Black Mountain School (although David Ignatow, as the reader will observe, owes a great deal to Williams). Neither are they members of the Bly coterie, although they are all--with the exception of James Dickey, who seems to have taken offense at Bly's article in THE SIXTIES entitled "The Collapse of James Dickey"--self-admittedly in his debt. John Logan, who, according to Dickey, has "an exciting chance of being one of the greatest poets this country has yet produced," is one of those rare birds, a completely original poet: he himself has remarked that he is waiting for the critics to tell him who his influences are. Notice, however, that he speaks of Williams Carlos Williams, the "poet father," in "A Trip to Four or Five Towns." William Stafford, who won the National Book Award for TRAVELLING THROUGH THE DARK, has the distinction of being the first great poet to have been born in Kansas and survive; he now lives in Oregon, where he writes at least one poem daily. John Knoepfle's first book, RIVERS INTO ISLANDS, appeared in 1965; the peculiar idiom in his poems is that of the Mississippi riverboat captains he has spent years interviewing and recording. David Ignatow has been writing poems since the thirties, but has only recently been recognized as one of our finest poets.

As with Assignment III, it is expected that merely reading the selections from all of these poets will keep you pretty busy; the writing assignment is therefore light. Again, it is hoped that you will take the time to read them aloud ("The Picnic," by the way, is particularly recommended for reading to girlfriends; Randall Jarrell, a late poet and critic, remarked that the most regrettable thing about modern poetry is that nobody reads it aloud in canoes anymore).

Reading Assignment:

OTHER VOICES in the Readings book.

James Dickey: pp. 77-80, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Galway Kinnell: pp. 151-155, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

John Logan: pp. 89-95, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

William Stafford: pp. 27-30, CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY.

Writing Assignment:

Write a cohesive two-hundred fifty word essay discussing one of the following questions.

1. "Travelling through the Dark" seems to be a parable of some kind; the poet seems, as Robert Frost put it, to be "saying one thing and meaning another." Explain this parable. Is the "dark" the poet is travelling through the darkness of one night only? Why does he "think hard for us all" before pushing the deer off the edge of the road? Why is it his "only swerving"?

2. In "The Bear," what does "that poetry" (in the last line of the poem) have to do with the rest of the poem?

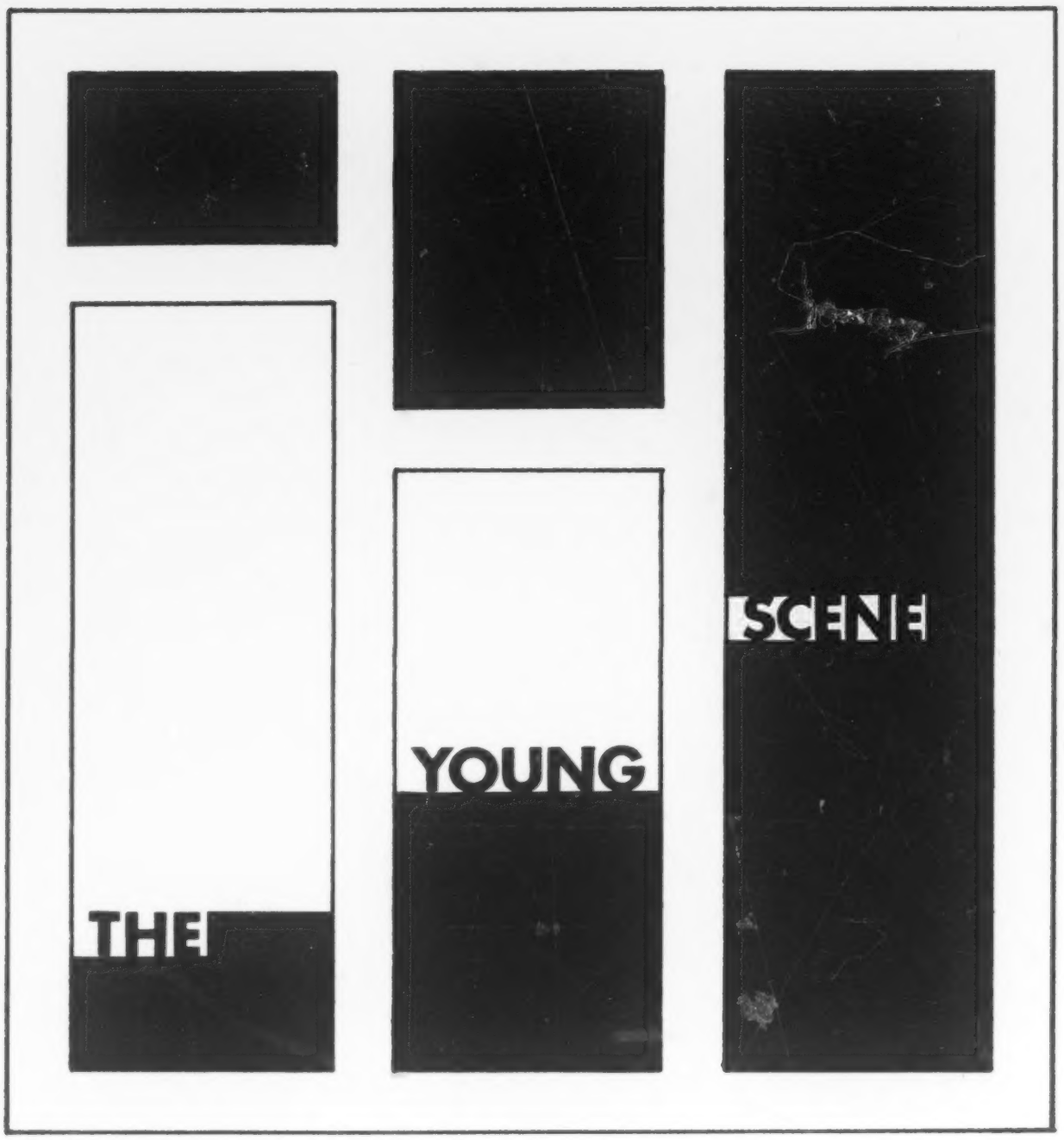
3. "The Picnic" is a poem about a single experience in the poet's life which he felt was important to him. He tells us,

> It was then some bright thing came in my eyes,
> Starting at the back of them and flowing
> Suddenly through my head and down my arms
> And stomach and my bare legs . . . .

What is this experience? What are the occurrences which cause it? What is the significance of the last line, in which the poet and Ruth walk down "To play the school games with the others"?

4. In "North on One-Eleven" there seems to be a distinction between brute, pragmatic force and another force, that of the spirit. St. Augustine is said to be alive, whereas the vandals who sacked the Roman Empire are dead. How does the reflection of the car lights on the railroad tracks convey the central message of the poem? Why does the poet "raise his arm/warding a blow"?

5. Is "How Come" as preposterous as it seems? Does it remind you of the pollution problems which we are now facing? What is the significance of the speaker's desperate question, "How come"?


THE
YOUNG
SCENE

ASSIGNMENT VII

THE YOUNG SCENE

Here are five very young poets about whom little can be said as a group except that they are all different. Bill Knott was born in 1940, orphaned, and until the recent publication of his NAOMI POEMS: CORPSE AND BEANS, worked as an orderly in a Chicago hospital. He now makes his living from poetry readings all over the country. Joel Sloman was born in Brooklyn in 1943, and at twenty-one published VIRGIL'S MACHINES, a remarkable book of poems to have been written by anyone at any age. He recently returned from England and has been working on a novel. Diane Wakoski was raised on the West Coast and now teaches at the New School in New York City. She has published three books of poems, DISCREPANCIES AND APPARATIONS, INSIDE THE BLOOD FACTORY, and THE MAGELLANIC CLOUDS. Richard Deutch was born in St. Louis in 1944. His poems have appeared in THE NATION, THE QUARTERLY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, and other magazines. He is the author of two volumes--THE DIME and another book of poetry to be issued in 1970--and is currently editing an anthology of young poets.

There are many young poets around as good as any of these, quite a few of whom have yet to publish a line. And there are many more young people who have yet to try their hand at writing poetry; they will, however, for there is no one who cannot write at least one good poem in his lifetime, and no one who has not felt the impulse to try.

Have you written yours?

Reading Assignment:

THE YOUNG SCENE in the Readings book.

Writing Assignment:

Answer any three of the following questions in a carefully-constructed paragraph or two.

1. How do the external details in "Widow's Winter" illustrate the widow's state of mind? Is the widow bitter, or resigned to her fate?

2. What are the two voices in "VOI(POEM)CES"? How do they answer one another? Which voice prevails at the end of the poem?

3. What is the significance of the long quotation from an eighteenth-century diary at the beginning of "The Mayflower Hotel"? Are the people in the poem like the writer of the diary? In what ways? Does the last line of the poem (which also has a date in it) suggest any similarity between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries?

4. What is the dramatic situation behind "Her and Him"? That is, from the details in the poem, what can the reader infer has happened between the man and the woman? They seemed relieved to be rid of one another. Why?

5. "Belly Dancer" gives us a very unusual insight into the mind of a strip-tease dancer. What is her attitude toward the men who watch her undress? Toward the women? Toward herself?

6. What is the significance of the use of sacramental imagery in "A Minor Sacrament"? Does the experience described in the poem seem to call for this sort of imagery? What is the meaning of the last line?

7. The speaker in "Poem for the Question in the Throat" seems to be paranoid. He seems to feel that someone is following him, that he is following someone, that he is uncomfortable within himself. In the second stanza, various events in recent American history are mentioned. How does the second stanza relate to the first?

The final exam will consist of questions similar to those at the end of the Assignments. You should be able to support your ideas about contemporary poetry with specific examples without using your books.